WORLD CHRONICLE

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PROGRAMME: "WORLD CHRONICLE"

GUEST: Elliot Richardson, Personal Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General for the Verification of the Elections in Nicaragua

JOURNALISTS: Ethan Schwartz, Washington Post
Robert Cohen, Latin America Feature Service
Linda Fasulo, WNYC Broadcasting

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

SYNOPSIS

Elliot Richardson, Personal Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for the Verification of the Elections in Nicaragua, discusses the U.N. role in ensuring free and fair elections in that country and the applicability of that experience to other countries.

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VOICE From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is WORLD CHRONICLE.

On February the 25th, 1990, before the eyes of hundreds of international observers, the Nicaraguan people made a decisive choice in free elections: the Sandinista Government is out, the opposition coalition led by Violeta Chamorro is in. For the winners, the immediate challenges are: how to disband the Contra forces, how to gain control of the military and security apparatus from the Sandinistas and how to soothe the bitter divisions of the past ten years.

Our guest today, Elliot Richardson of the United States, is the United Nations Secretary-General's Personal Representative for the Verification of the Elections in Nicaragua. Mr. Richardson will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Ethan Schwartz of the Washington Post; Robert Cohen of the Latin America Feature Service; and Linda Fasulo of WNYC Broadcasting.

For some background information, here's a report from our correspondent, Steve Whitehouse.

WHITEHOUSE: It was the most important election in Nicaragua's history. In the last few days before the voting, the opposition UNO party and the governing Sandinistas held final rallies for their supporters.

For six months, at the invitation of the government, observers from the United Nations had been monitoring the electoral process. One important role: analyzing state-run radio and television to ensure all parties received equal treatment.

Election day. Long lines formed at the 4,400 voting points across the country. Observers from the UN and the two other official observer groups, the Organization of American States and the team of former U.S. President, Jimmy Carter, were in place.

Throughout the country, international observers carefully monitored voting stations, to ensure that the election was free and fair. The UN Secretary-General's Personal Representative, Elliot Richardson, visited regional centres to check on the monitoring operation and talk to local officials. By day's end the UN reported no significant incidents.

The vote counting was followed closely by international observers. Results were radioed back to UN Headquarters in Managua to be compared with official returns. Within hours of the polls closing, it was clear the opposition UNO party had won. Nicaraguan voters handed them 55% of their ballots.

The losing Sandinistas polled 41% of the vote. They will remain the largest political party when they hand over power in April.

Complicating the process of transferring power is the presence of thousands of Contras, the Nicaraguan resistance, in Honduras and northern Nicaragua. A possible future role for the UN in the region will be to assist in the voluntary demobilization and repatriation of the contras.

After a decade of war which has resulted in tens of thousands of deaths, the completion of the election offers the real prospect of peace. And the beginning of national reconstruction and reconciliation.

Now Nicaraguans have the opportunity of a new beginning. And the hope that their election will be an important step in the overall Central American peace process.

LITTLEJOHNS: Amb. Richardson, the success of the coalition led by Mrs. Chamorro seems to have caught a lot of people by surprise, particularly here in the United States. You were viewing the process in two visits I believe to Nicaragua before the final days that led up to the polling, were you surprised by the result?

RICHARDSON: Well, of course I read the same polls and I was somewhat influenced by them but I knew that from my own observation I really couldn't tell how it was going. I was after all meeting with officials of the government and leaders of UNO and various electoral authorities and party people, but I had picked up enough from other observers to know that there was a very real possibility -- two American members of Congress for example had been down two weeks before the elections, both had come back convinced that UNO would win and I think there were many people who felt that the polls should be discounted because

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after all there had been what amounted to an authoritarian one-party government for 10 years and the Security Police had been pervasive during much of that time and for people under those circumstances freely to volunteer their actual intentions to poll surveyors, was of course not entirely probable.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador, although the Sandinistas have had a rather bad reputation, to put it mildly, here in the United States I dare say it could be argued that some of the things that they did when they were in power were not that bad. How do you account for their defeat? What was the main factor in their defeat?

RICHARDSON: Well, you could look at it the other way around. After all here was a government seeking a continuation in office by popular vote under circumstances in which personal per capita income had been cut by more than 3/4 over ten years.

LITTLEJOHNS: But that was partly the result of the American embargo, was it not?

RICHARDSON: Oh, yes but that's the point. Here you have a result in which personal income has been cut, agricultural land has been taken out of production, the current rate of inflation is perhaps plus or minus 10,000% and in those circumstances the only real prospect that the FRENTE had at all was that it could blame everything on the United States. That in turn might well have suggested to many voters that the best way of getting help out of the economic disaster that confronted them would be to support a government with a better claim on the United States.

LITTLEJOHNS: But isn't there a risk that President-elect Chamorro could be regarded as, to use a rather unpleasant word, a stooge of the United States?

RICHARDSON: Of course, Daniel Ortega did his very best to pin that label on her but as I suggest, after all it's a mistake to assume that people who may not be very well educated are also unintelligent, that very label may have come across to a lot of voters in the countryside as the assurance that she would have a far better claim on US support than he would.

SCHWARTZ: Ambassador, I'm tempted to go straight towards the $64,000 question in all of this. When you look back on the election and then take a look at the past 10 years of US policy, what's your conclusion? Does what happened in Nicaragua justify 10 years of aiding the Contras and economic sanctions and so forth? Is that why the Nicaraguan government fell or do you think that with what Americans would like to think of democracy blooming around the world is that what actually finally found its way to Central America?

RICHARDSON: I suppose it's permissible for me since my role as Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for the Elections has ceased -- I'm not sure what continuing role I have in the transition -- to answer that question which after all calls for judgements of a political character going beyond my UN capacity, but I think the answer is that you need to divide one's perspective on this into two parts. In the short-term, the outcome could have been said to be a success for US policy. The Nicaraguan economy had been brought to its knees, some continuing Contra activity was still costing lives and certainly the decision by the government to seek an election, to invite international observers in order to certify it as free and fair was in large measure directed toward bringing about a result that would lead to the lifting of the US embargo and cessation of hostilities. And to that extent it could be said, aha the US policies were vindicated but, I think if you go back to an earlier stage and ask whether the embargo and the support of the

Contras were justified in the first instance, I think the answer is no. I think that had the United States vigorously pursued the Contadoran initiatives, had it joined with Oscar Arias in the promotion of the peace process rather than being dragged into, there could have been negotiated a solution much earlier that would have spared a great deal of suffering and economic deprivation.

SCHWARTZ: Well, now to look to the transition process. As you know two interrelated issues obviously are the large Contra forces and the Sandinista domination of the army. There was some saber rattling immediately after the election on both sides but now things seem to be calming down a bit, what direction do you see a settlement heading in and what role might the UN play in ensuring both the Sandinista army's security as well as the Contra's free return to the country?

RICHARDSON: Let's start with what I think is generally agreed on. Really all three sides if you count the United States as one, the Sandinistas, Violeta Chamorro and UNO and there's the United States, all agree that there should be a peaceful transition of authority under the constitution of Nicaragua including transfer of the Ministries of Defence and of the Interior which means in turn, control over the armed forces and the security forces and nothing has been said from the outset, by the Sandinistas, to suggest that they did not intend to follow through with this. Second, it's agreed by all three, that is Nicaraguan parties and the United States, that the objective of early demobilization of the Contras should be pursued with third, the utilization of the UN to monitor and assist that process which leads you then to the real problem which is what plan, what kinds of safeguards can be offered to the Contras that would induce them to lay down their arms and, in the case of those outside the country, to return to Nicaragua

and that is a process which the UN seems likely at the moment to have a very large role, and perhaps a major role.

COHEN: Amb. Richardson, the President of Venezuela, Carlos Andres Perez, has said that the Contras are at this point the greatest obstacle to a smooth and peaceful transition in Nicaragua, would you agree with that assessment and inasmuch as the UN will be playing a role in their demobilization what is your feeling about statements from Contra leaders to the effect that there must be a parallel or simultaneous process of dismantling of the Sandinista armed forces as a precondition, or as a simultaneous condition, for the demobilization of the Contras?

RICHARDSON: I would agree with Carlos Andres Perez that this is probably the most troublesome issue but I don't think it's a rock on which the transitional process is likely to founder. I think, for the reasons I mentioned earlier, that there is substantial accord between the Sandinistas and UNO leaders in seeking to bring about the earliest possible demobilization. I do not think that the delay of demobilization will in fact frustrate the transfer of authority over the army and the security forces.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is **WORLD CHRONICLE.** Our guest is Elliot Richardson, Personal Representative of the UN Secretary-General for the Verification of the Elections in Nicaragua.

RICHARDSON: I hadn't finished the answer to the question he asked.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm sorry. Go ahead, Sir.

RICHARDSON; I was going to say that the question then is, will the Contras buy the proposed measures to give them confidence in laying down their arms. As of the moment, we don't yet know. The first thing that needs to be done is to flesh out and give specific detail to the plans by which their security would be assured and then, having done that, to convince them that this plan is good enough so that they should be willing to put down their arms and re-enter the society of Nicaragua.

COHEN: You spoke before about a peaceful transition within the current constitutional framework of Nicaragua. That constitution not only guarantees that Violeta Chamorro will be able to name the Ministers of Defence and the Interior etc., but also guarantees that there can be no constitutional change without a 60% or two-thirds vote in the National Assembly. UNO doesn't have 2/3 of the votes in the Assembly, the Sandinistas remain the biggest party in the Assembly. Does that indicate to you that the gains of the revolution or the measures of the revolution if you want to put it that way, will remain intact during the Chamorro period?

RICHARDSON: I think the big "gains" will remain intact. Indeed Violeta Chamorro and UNO have already in the transitional process committed themselves not to try to roll back the significant gains that were put in place, including land reform and so on. There are a lot of tough problems on title to individual pieces of land but you are absolutely right that should there be such an effort that in turn required amending the constitution, that the Sandinistas would be able to block, and for that matter the Sandinistas may be able to enact affirmative legislation since they only have to pick up six UNO votes and UNO it should be remembered, after all includes the Communist party and some very far left splinter groups. So it's quite possible therefore, that you may see a legislative

movement in the other direction but, let me just add, I think both sides, including the Sandinistas, have long since been moving toward a pretty pragmatic centre and that what you are now seeing and the transition teams on both sides, reflects a practical approach to the genuine interests of the country and I think that the ideological fervour of the early Sandinista years has been totally dissipated in the way that Marxism-Leninism as an ideology has evaporated in other places.

FASULO: Amb. Richardson, what role do you anticipate Mr. Ortega playing after the transition of power on April 25th, do you think he will sit back and write his memoirs or will he take an active role?

RICHARDSON: Hopefully not. A presidential candidate who gets a certain fraction of the vote is automatically entitled to a seat in the Assembly. He was the only losing presidential candidate who got enough of a vote to get such a seat so that in addition to 39 assembly seats that were otherwise elected by the Sandinistas, he will represent the 40th seat and presumably be their leader on the Assembly floor, but in addition to that he has now I think, by virtue of having stepped down, accepted defeat gracefully and committing himself to a smooth transition under the constitution, won himself a place of international respect significantly greater than he had as President and I would expect him, on the basis of this, to move into the relative vacuum that now exists in the Central American peace process more broadly. And I think that we are by no means likely to lose sight of Daniel Ortega as an international political figure.

FASULO: There were some last minute changes in legislation that transferred some state property to Sandinistas, how significant were these measures? Will they be a problem in the transition?

RICHARDSON: The short answer to that Linda, is that I don't know. I've seen reports of this. I'm not sure whether UNO wants to make much of an issue of it. One thing that is not often been said, at least not in the United States, to the credit of the Sandinistas is that they have not been personally corrupt, they have not accumulated wealth. They have lived pretty well in the same houses while holding office and it may be felt that whether you agreed with them or not they've been doing the work of the country for a long time but I don't really know what the reaction to that is likely to be.

SCHWARTZ: Ambassador, as you pointed out, UNO is a coalition of fairly diverse political groups from the far right to the far left, is it a marriage of convenience? Will it break apart as they confront the country's social issues or do you think Chamorro can forge some kind of working coalition?

RICHARDSON: I would have to say Mr. Schwartz, no. No special insight into this. On the face of it, it will take resourceful leadership to weld that coalition into a party and there a lot will depend of course on the affirmative programmes, things that Violetta Chamorro and her top advisers, her cabinet in effect, are trying to get done and here, of course, the first challenge once you get beyond the demobilization of the Contras and the problems of the size of the armed forces and so on, are problems of economic growth and development, recovery, and there the question of how official assistance to be used and so on are the top issues already being addressed by her economic adviser, Mayorga, and so it may well be that just by the momentum generated by these affirmative programmes to address the economic problems that she will be able to bring all these people along.

COHEN: Ambassador, looking back on the UN mission to observe the elections and now the broader UN role in Central America, do you feel that there have been any breakthroughs or important lessons for UN peace-keeping and UN solution of conflicts, international conflicts, that you could extract from your experience?

RICHARDSON: I think so, yes. To begin with I think it is pretty clear that the role of the UN and the OAS was, whatever else it accomplished, a role which reminded the contending parties in Nicaragua that whatever they were doing was being done under the watchful eyes of the world community. I think it contributed to putting them on their best behaviour. At the same time, the UN mission with support from the OAS, and I put it that way I think quite fairly, took strong initiatives toward addressing those problems that arose during the course of the electoral process. The UN had been sent there, not just to lay foundations for watching an election but to verify the process from the outset and one of the things we concluded earlier on was that the UN couldn't see things wrong and just note them down to be put into a report issued after the election when these very things might vitiate the electoral process even before any vote was cast, so we worked toward getting these corrected from the outset and the ways in which -- which I won't go into detail on -- this task was approached I think was genuinely precedent setting. And I would just note that on election night itself Daniel Ortega urged that the UN and the OAS, with an assist from time to time from President Carter, to stay on during the transitional process and the UN now has a presence in Nicaragua, no longer ONUVEM, no longer the mission to verify the election, but a transition team to assist that process I think largely because it was felt that the UN was a genuinely impartial participant interested in seeking to assure compliance with democratic processes, decent regard for the

interests of all parties and especially the people of Nicaragua and that's why we have been counted upon to do this.

FASULO: Amb. Richardson, with the UN success in Nicaragua do you see the UN taking on this kind of role elsewhere in the world?

RICHARDSON: I'm sure it will but of course the question of what are the conditions under which that is appropriate will need to be thought through carefully. My own view for example is that for the UN to undertake such an assignment in another independent sovereign state, be it remembered that this was the first time that the UN had ever done this in any already independent state, there ought to be a multilateral, international dimension. The case where that is clearly so for example is Cambodia. On the other hand, if the UN were invited to monitor the election let's say in Rumania, I think the UN should hesitate. I don't see why the mere prospect that there may be threats or violence or fraud in an election should by itself be a reason why the UN should be asked to intervene.

LITTLEJOHNS: Amb. Richardson, as we all know the United Nations is not exactly an affluent organization for various reasons, was this a costly operation this verification?

RICHARDSON: Apparently not very, no. It cost, I'm not sure, but in the order of $3 million to $5 million as compared with hundreds of millions for the UN role in Namibia where of course the UN responsibility was for the whole conduct of the transition to independence and where the UN had much larger forces.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Richardson, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

Our guest has been Elliot Richardson, Personal Representative of the UN Secretary-General for the Verification of the Elections in Nicaragua. He was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Ethan Schwartz of the Washington Post; Robert Cohen of the Latin American Features Service; and Linda Fasulo of WNYC Broadcasting.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

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